



**Minutes on D-E NCA Advisory Council, August 3,, 2011  
Delta Performing Arts Center, Delta, CO**

Advisory Council members attending:

- Vice-chair Bill Harris of Montrose
- Oscar Massey of Whitewater
- Terry Kimber of Delta
- Neil "Mike" Wilson of Eckert

Absent members:

- Chair Katie Steele of Grand Junction
- Steve Acquafresca of Grand Junction
- Joe Neuhof of Grand Junction
- Tamera Minnick of Grand Junction

BLM staff attending: Katie A. Stevens, Ben Blom and Brodie Farquhar

Audience members: Doug Atchley representing Delta County , Lee Gelatt, Conrad Tucker, Mary Tucker, Eric Rechel, Kaye Simonson, Terry Gray, Kent Davis, Sherry Schank , Dick Miller, Hank Lohmeyer

Vice-chairman **Harris** noted the lack of a quorum (six are needed). **Stevens** said the *Federal Register* has announced that nominations are sought for two positions, to bring the Council up to 10 members. Replacements are sought for Jan McCracken (former Delta County commissioner) and Jason Beason (wildlife interests). Nomination forms are available on the D-E NCA website and were provided to the public at the meeting.

**Public Comment**

(Most of the public's opening comments pertained to Cactus Park, the zone discussed at the July meetings.)

**Lee Gelatt** (Quiet Trails) suggested that a Special Recreation Management Area approach might not always be an appropriate tool in a National Conservation Area. The Quiet Trails group wants to "keep things as they are," meaning motorized recreation should remain, but not be promoted so that the NCA becomes a motorized playground. He said the group is looking for a quiet trail or two in Cactus Park and that low route density areas such as Dominguez North, Gibbler Mountain and Gibbler Gulch should be excluded from any motorized recreation SRMA.

**Sherry Schank** (Great Old Broads for Wilderness) asked for clarification from a July meeting minutes, which stated that "in an SRMA, the BLM would make a significant commitment to protect a specific

recreation activity, use and experience. When recreation comes into conflict with other resources or resource uses in an SRMA, recreation would have priority.” **Stevens** responded that that was an oversimplification and that legal obligations – such as protecting cultural sites – remain in effect. She emphasized that recreation is a purpose under the NCA’s founding Act, and that there is room for trade-offs between recreation and other purposes and resources, although recreation does receive more management attention and priority in a SRMA.

**Conrad Tucker** (Western Slope ATV Association) said Cactus Park is a premiere destination for ATVs and should be left alone. A quiet trail can be added to the mix without closing OHV routes. He urged BLM to consider creating loops by linking trail stems, and emphasized the point that his organization often builds and maintains trails on public land.

**Eric Rechel** (Sierra Club) suggested that wildlife be given special standing where there is low trail density, such as the Gunnison Bluffs, Gibbler Peak and Gibbler Gulch. He suggested the creation of Special Wildlife Management Areas (SWMAs) in these parts of Zone 3. Interaction of wildlife with ATVs doesn’t benefit wildlife, he said, while high trail density lowers habitat value for elk. He said all recreationists have impacts on habitat and that the commitment should be to reduce that impact for wildlife and future generations.

#### **Recap of last meeting.**

**Stevens** said the motorized recreation community is strongly interested in Cactus Park, including trials riding, single track motorcycle trails. Quiet users are also interested in Cactus Park. After talking with Chairwoman Steele, Stevens said the Council should visit Cactus Park with motorized and quiet users. Time is growing short with the hunting season right around the corner. She said a tour would be useful and a way to explore sustainability issues and conditions on the ground involving trails and wildlife.

**Tucker, Gray and Gelatt** said their groups would be happy to arrange tours and transportation.

#### **Zone 5 PowerPoint Summary**

**Blom** said Zone 5 encompasses Escalante Canyon, Sawmill and Dry Mesas, the ridges southwest of Dominguez Canyon Wilderness (Sowbelly, Tatum, Camp) and Wagon Park.

**Topography** ranges in elevation from low-lying areas nearest to the Gunnison River and the City of Delta to the upper elevations nearest to Uncompahgre National Forest. The major canyons include Escalante, Dry Fork Escalante, and Cottonwood. Wagon Park is in Mesa County and is surrounded by Dominguez Canyon Wilderness and the national forest. It was excluded from the wilderness because it had been heavily chained and developed for livestock grazing in the past.

Escalante Canyon is a showcase of spectacular **geology**. Descending formations seen in the cliff walls run through Salt Wash, Entrada, Kayenta, Wingate, Chinle and Pre-Cambrian formations. The Brushy Basin formation has a high likelihood of containing fossils and is found in parts of Zone 5.

**Water** resources in the Zone include year-round and ephemeral streams. The area around Escalante Canyon has numerous seeps and springs.

**Land health** assessments for Zone 5 indicate that two-thirds is meeting the BLM’s land health standards, while one-fourth is either meeting with problems (22 percent) or not meeting (4 percent). Areas consisting of desert shrub and sagebrush vegetation types have the most land health problems. Parts of the riparian zones along Dry Fork Escalante and Cottonwood Creek also have land health problems.

More specifically, land health problems include:

- Loss of native grasses and forbs
- Spread of exotic/noxious weeds
- Low plant biodiversity
- Loss of native, riparian vegetation
- Low plant cover

- Loss of cryptogamic soils
- Mortality of Colorado hookless cactus
- Exposure of bighorn sheep to disease

Causes of the above problems include:

- Historic grazing
- Drought
- Spread of noxious/invasive plants
- Livestock grazing in riparian areas
- Water diversions and dams
- Roads and trails, as a means of spreading weeds

**Miller** questioned why overgrazing by elk was not included in the list of causes of the above problems. His contact with the BLM had mentioned this as the primary problem identified in the land health assessments. **Blom** responded that this may be a problem in some areas within the NCA, but was not seen to be a major problem throughout Zone 5.

**Grazing** in Zone 5 features 10 allotments, including two sheep allotments (Cactus Park-Club Gulch and Lower Escalante); one mixed horse and cattle allotment (Sawmill Mesa) and seven cattle allotments. In the 1960s and 1970s, many of the mesa tops southeast of Escalante Canyon and in Wagon Park were chained and re-seeded with crested wheatgrass. The BLM's inventory of range improvement projects identifies 117 water developments in this zone (stock tanks, dams, reservoirs, catchments, guzzlers).

**Special status species** in Zone 5 includes one threatened species – the Colorado hookless cactus – under the Endangered Species Act. BLM sensitive species that have been confirmed in Zone 5 within the past 10 years include:

- Desert bighorn sheep
- Grand Junction milk vetch
- Eastwood's monkey flower
- Peregrine falcon
- White-tailed prairie dog
- Bluehead sucker
- Flannelmouth sucker
- Roundtail chub
- Colorado River cutthroat trout

An **Area of Critical Environmental Concern** is located in Escalante Canyon -- 1,895 acres designated for sensitive plant species, natural seeps, and several globally-unique plant associations that only grow in those seeps – such as Eastwood's monkey flower.

**Desert bighorn sheep** can be seen throughout the low elevations of Zone 5 and like to winter on irrigated pastures in the canyon bottom.

**Cultural resources** include historic resources like Captain Smith's Cabin (actually on land owned by Colorado Division of Wildlife) and prehistoric resources like rock art. Escalante Canyon in particular, has the potential to be managed as a heritage tourism destination associated with both the prehistory and history of the canyon. **Blom** noted that vandalism of rock art has been and still is a threat to cultural resources in this zone and throughout the NCA.

**Recreation** in Zone 5 has such opportunities as:

- Heritage tourism in Escalante Canyon
- Mountain biking
- Motorized recreation
- Quiet use recreation, (particularly in Dry Fork Escalante and Cottonwood Creek canyons).

**Blom** emphasized the fact that there are significant opportunities for the City of Delta and Delta County to benefit from tourism and recreation in Zone 5. Some of these opportunities do not exist now in this zone.

Surveys taken by Mesa State faculty have given BLM insights into the activities people enjoy in Zone 5, as well as the categories into which these people fall. Hunting, swimming, ATV riding and auto touring are all popular activities according to the Mesa State survey data. The people coming to Zone 5 include quiet contemplative (33%), affiliation and social cohesion (34%), work where I play (22%) and close to nature (11%) niche bundles. **Blom** emphasized the diversity of recreation activities currently done in Escalante Canyon, which he said is a major attraction to the NCA.

There are, however, problems associated with recreation in Zone 5, including trespass on private property, as recreationists cross property to reach BLM lands or Escalante Creek. Complaints include gates left open, trash, noise, increased traffic and unauthorized camping.

The recreation site with the heaviest use is the **Potholes** area, which is used by extreme kayakers in the spring, and has been the site of numerous injuries, drownings and deaths due to people diving off the surrounding cliffs into the water.

In 2005, the BLM implemented new rules for the potholes area and developed the area (toilet, information kiosk, picnic shelters) to encourage better stewardship. The number and severity of incidents at the Potholes has declined since these new rules were applied.

**Mountain bicycling** has potential for growth in Zone 5. The mountain biking community has identified the Sawmill Mesa area for a potential single-track trail system in the NCA. The mountain bike community would like an SRMA-type mountain bike trail system somewhere in the DENCA. The topography of this area and proximity to Delta lends itself well to the development of mountain bike trails.

**Blom** noted that **motorized recreationists** use the Cactus Park (South) and Sawmill Mesa areas for trail rides. However, the topography of the area, as well as the lack of adjoining motorized trails on USFS land, would make the development of an SRMA-type motorized recreation area difficult in Zone 5.

**Wilson** stated that the OHV community uses this area near town as a winter area, but that they are not looking to expand (but rather preserve) the current OHV opportunities in the Cactus Park South/Sawmill Mesa area.

**Big game hunting** is popular in the higher elevations of Zone 5, and on the neighboring Uncompahgre National Forest. The area north of Escalante Creek, southwest of the wilderness, is highly valued and most heavily used during big game hunting season. Wagon Park is also a popular area for hunting. The elk population has grown in D-E NCA in recent decades, and so has hunting activity.

**Camping** is often associated with hunting in the fall and winter. There are several designated camping sites in Escalante Canyon, but all other camping is done at dispersed, undeveloped campsites.

**Quiet use** recreation (horse and foot) has opportunities in Zone 5. New trails could be developed, particularly along Cottonwood Creek and Dry Fork Escalante Creek.

**Lands with wilderness characteristics** are found in Zone 5 – most easily seen in trail density maps and the green color which denotes the presence of no trails and roads. During scoping, the BLM received comments from the public about protection of wilderness characteristics for the roadless area southwest of the wilderness boundary. **Stevens** added that the BLM is required to maintain an inventory of areas with wilderness characteristics, and to consider these areas in RMPs. BLM staff are currently working to update these inventories, examining the Cottonwood Canyon and Dry Fork Escalante areas. In response to a question from the public, **Stevens** added that the BLM is not required to manage these lands for their wilderness characteristics but that they must be considered during planning.

#### **Zone 5 recreation worksheet**

The first question to ask about Zone 5 is “Should the BLM consider making a commitment for recreation in this zone?”

Both the City of Delta and Delta County see D-E NCA as an opportunity for bringing more tourism and recreation to Delta. The mountain bike community would like to develop an SRMA-type mountain biking area somewhere within the NCA.

**Harris** said he sees a growing recognition that whatever plan emerges, BLM will need more financial help to address trail maintenance. **Atchley** noted that in his view, city and county perceptions about tourism and recreation may not be the same. He emphasized that Delta County values wants to see tourism, but would want to be cognizant of whether that would affect livestock grazing negatively. The area identified as a potential mountain bike area is used infrequently for grazing and so may not lead to recreation/grazing conflicts.

**Stevens** noted that just as there are concerns about encouraging recreation in the NCA, and that there are also concerns about increased traffic in Escalante Canyon. Hunters in higher elevations are also concerned about increased visitation. The Council discussed the idea of “leave it the way it is” was discussed by the council.

**Stevens** then provided an overview regarding the limitations on recreation in this zone. The area’s deep canyons limit trail development. There is a high density of cultural sites in the area.

Special status species – hookless cactus, desert bighorn, white-tailed prairie dogs, BLM-sensitive fish and the hanging gardens all need to be protected. More motorized trails can fragment habitat.

Access to much of Zone 5 is via Escalante Canyon road, Sawmill Mesa road and 25 Mesa Road. Access to Wagon Park is primarily via Divide and Dominguez Campground roads.

What are the costs and tradeoffs to make a commitment to recreation? The costs of surveys (for threatened and endangered species, cultural and paleontological sites) for trail construction are likely to be the biggest cost for recreation in any zone of the NCA.

Discussion revealed very different perspectives as to whether historical tourism can bring visitors to Zone 5, with **Wilson** saying there are opportunities for it along the Gunnison River and **Kimber** doubting whether Denver-area residents will come for historical tours in DENCA. **Harris** said historical tourism seems to be working elsewhere on the western slope.

**Stevens** said according to Colorado research, the biggest emerging market for tourism in Colorado is heritage tourism. **Miller** said if recreation is going to be pushed in Escalante Canyon, the county will need to make a greater investment in road safety and maintenance. Where will the money come from?

**Kimber** called the issue a double-edged sword – that if more money is spent on better roads, more tourists will come and then more money will need to be spent on road and safety infrastructure. **Davis** said that just having the NCA sign at the turnoff for Escalante Canyon Road attracts more people and should be removed.

**Gelatt** said doing nothing means trouble. Recreation is here and BLM needs to plan for future. More people are coming no matter what we do. Visitation growth is already happening, said **Wilson**. Parking at McCarty Trail used to be one car, now it can be as high as nine. **Gelatt** asked what does a commitment to recreation mean? Is an SRMA necessary? **Kimber** asked whether the NCA should be conserved for what it is today, or what it should be in the future?

**Stevens** asked what partnership opportunities are available? User groups can help with trail maintenance, the audience suggested. Members of the archeological society can provide site stewardship said **Harris**.

#### **Public Comment:**

**Gelatt** said Heritage and Conservation tourism will be important and asked the Council to remember the quiet user.

**Rechel** asked that more hiking trails be created in the lands with wilderness characteristics in order to protect resources. **Kimber** questioned the need for quiet use trails.

**Wilson** asked that motorized routes be kept open to the wilderness boundary so that people can access the wilderness area.

#### **Next Meeting**

The next meeting for the Advisory Council will be at 3 p.m., August 17 in Grand Junction. Field trip opportunities will be explored. The next meeting's focus will be on the Dominguez Canyon Wilderness, Zone 4 of the NCA.